

Experts in U.S. and China see a chance for cooperation against climate change

By Edward Wong and Andrew C. Revkin Published: February 5, 2009/IHT

BEIJING: When Chinese officials and the Obama administration begin serious discussions over issues at the heart of relations between China and the United States, the usual suspects will no doubt emerge: trade, North Korea, human rights, Taiwan.

But an increasing number of officials and scholars from both countries say climate change is likely to become another focal point in the dialogue. American and Chinese leaders recognize the urgency of global warming, the scholars and officials say, and believe that a new international climate treaty is impossible without agreements between their nations, the world's two largest emitters of greenhouse gases.

In a sign of this new emphasis, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton plans to stress the importance of new steps on energy and global warming when she visits China, perhaps as soon as this month, an Obama administration official said.

A report to be released Thursday presents a blueprint for President Barack Obama and Chinese leaders to begin addressing together, as a major priority, how to curb emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases linked to rising temperatures.

The report, "A Roadmap for U.S.-China Cooperation on Energy and Climate Change," is a joint project of the Asia Society and the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, both based in the United States. Scientists and policy advisers from both countries contributed to the report.

The origins of the report indicate that it could carry weight in the White House. It was produced by a committee led by Steven Chu, a Nobel laureate in physics who is now the secretary of energy, and John Thornton, a professor at Tsinghua University who has been mentioned as a possible candidate for United States ambassador to China. John Holdren, Obama's choice for science adviser, is another contributor.

The report recommends that China and the United States convene a presidential summit meeting to create a broad plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, followed by the appointment of senior officials and independent experts to councils and task forces to develop concrete programs. It says the two governments should lay out areas for cooperation, including the deployment of low-emissions coal technologies, the improvement of energy efficiency and conservation, and the promotion of renewable energy.

In China, scholars and policy advisers who support the proposals say talks on energy technology and climate change could foster a cooperative relationship between the Obama administration and China. A central question is whether Chinese leaders and American lawmakers will be too focused on reviving their economies to pay serious attention to curbing emissions.

But at least in public, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and other officials have said recently that the financial crisis actually gives China an opportunity to turn its growth model away from one that was not environmentally sustainable.

"I believe climate change may become a very important issue which will put China-U.S. relations in a new framework in the 21st century because the stakes are high," said Wu Jianmin, a senior adviser to the Foreign Ministry and former ambassador to France. "We all understand we don't have much time left. We've got to work together."

This largely meshes with Obama's hope for helping to revive the American economy by developing non-polluting energy technologies and "green jobs."

Todd Stern, who was appointed Clinton's special envoy for climate change, said the administration hoped to end sparring between the nations over who needs to do what first.

"Secretary Clinton is keenly aware that the United States, as the largest historic emitter of greenhouse gases, and China, as the largest emitter going forward, need to develop a strong, constructive partnership

to build the kind of clean-energy economies that will allow us to put the brakes on global climate change," he said in an e-mail message.

But some American officials and experts on climate and energy say that although Chinese leaders declare they are serious about the issue, it has been hard to pin them down on specific measures.

Wen, in an interview with The Financial Times published Monday, restated China's position that it does not intend to agree to specific limits at a United Nations conference on climate change scheduled for December in Copenhagen.

"It's difficult for China to take quantified emission reduction quotas at the Copenhagen conference, because this country is still at an early stage of development," he said. "Europe started its industrialization several hundred years ago, but for China, it has only been dozens of years."

Gao Guangsheng, who directs the climate change office at the National Development and Reform Commission, presented a white paper in October that said the world's richest countries should contribute 1 percent of their gross domestic product to helping developing countries combat global warming.

Zhang Haibin, an associate professor at Peking University who specializes in international environmental politics, said in an interview that China and the United States had historically had weak cooperation on the climate change problem, but that Chinese leaders believed that the relationship could change under Obama.

Several American experts on energy, climate and Chinese-American relations said the report built on other recent calls for sustained partnerships on energy efficiency, technology for capturing carbon dioxide from power plants and other initiatives.

But they also said that task forces and summit meetings alone would be ineffective unless they resulted in programs and investments that continued for many years.

"Nearly everything that these two countries have tried to do jointly on climate and energy has been episodic," said David Victor, a political scientist at Stanford University who studies energy and climate. "The financial crisis has created an opportunity for a dialogue, but it also creates a host of new risks as the countries turn inward."

Orville Schell, a veteran journalist who helped supervise the writing of the report as director of the Asia Society Center on U.S.-China Relations, said that in recent meetings Chinese officials were beginning to recognize the need to take action on climate change.

"We have watched as officials in China have become much more receptive to the need to do 'something' about climate change, although they are still unwilling to set caps," Schell said in an e-mail message. "We have also watched our own country molt out of stubborn opposition to a far more open willingness to recognize the scientific basis of the problem and the need to do something about it."

Edward Wong reported from Beijing, and Andrew C. Revkin from New York.